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Author(s): Johan J. Smertenko

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RACE, CULTURAL GROUPS, SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION

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AN INTERPRETATION OF THE JEWISH PROBLEM

JOHAN J. SMERTENKO

I

OF ALL the incongruities which indicate how far man is from that perfect and blessed state of reason the most absurd, I believe, is the attitude of both Christians and Jews toward Jewish history.¹ For here in the twentieth century of enlightenment we find that ten thousand persons are intimately acquainted with the ancient chronicles of a nation for every one who knows even vaguely of this people's progress in modern times. Yet,—with due deference to those who consider the Scripture as something more than chronicle—the history of the Jewish people in exile is fully as important and certainly as interesting as the tale that is told of its tribal development and national decline. For modern Jewish history is unique and illuminating not only in its presentation of a singular situation and of peculiar national problems but also in its testimony concerning the political and religious *mores* of our entire civilization and in its gauging of the shifting psychology of mankind.

The Jewish people has been dispersed over the world longer than any existing

nation has been united. This dispersion dates back to Nebuchadnezzar's conquest in the sixth century B. C., since the ensuing Babylonian captivity, though it did not materially affect the later fortunes of Palestine, served to establish throughout the Mediterranean region exilian communities which, augmented by fresh arrivals during the Alexandrian period, were the nuclei for Jewish settlements during the final exodus in the second century A. D. Both the length of this dispersion and its unbroken continuity are responsible for the present character and position of the Jewish people, for the first has had its due effect on the psychic processes of the race and the second has created a misunderstanding which is basic in the mental attitude of the Gentile toward the Jew. Thus, even as any period of autonomous and coherent national existence is reflected in the traits and manners of a people, so the corresponding period of life in exile has been reflected in the characteristics and customs of the Jewish people; and, for the second effect, the constant accretions of Palestinian Jews to the exilic colonies engendered in every land the conception that Jew and alien were synonymous despite the fact that the early Jewish settlers had completely assimilated the native civilization and that in numerous cases—as in Rome and Spain, Bulgaria and Ukraine—

¹ *Survival or Extinction* by Elisha M. Friedman, New York, Thomas Seltzer, 1924, XII, 297 pp. \$2.50.

Liberalizing Liberal Judaism by James Waterman Wise, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1924, 150 pp. \$1.50.

they had preceded the Gothic, Mongol and Slavic invaders who founded the modern states.

These mental attitudes, Jewish and Gentile, though they have now penetrated so far into the consciousness of the people as to constitute instinctive reactions did not at the time prevent the development of the Jewish communities. Indeed, it was not until the acceptance of Christianity as a state religion by the Roman emperors that the Jews suffered from any pronounced disabilities and restrictions, and during the heyday of the Frankish Empire they actually flourished. But as the Roman Catholic church gained power the lot of the Jew, the inveterate dissenter, grew worse; in fact, the growth of the church can be measured by the increasing persecution of the Jewish people that culminates in the series of expulsions which drove the Jews from Western Europe to the Russian Pale.

It was during this period that Israel acquired the perverse psychic traits of a persecuted race. The isolation which had been a voluntary measure of expediency inspired by the belief of a prompt return to Palestine became compulsory when Papal bulls limited their occupations, branded them with a special mark and costume, and confined them to Ghettos. Their resulting uniqueness, their office as tax-collectors and usurers, and their segregated life naturally made them the objects of popular hatred and suspicion in an age of brutality and superstition. The Jew was an outlaw destitute of rights and deprived of protection under the law, at the mercy of mob moods and the whims of potentates.

Naturally the Jewish people sought a means of escape from this situation. After exhausting the various "compensatory" philosophies and ideals they turned to assimilation as it was urged

by the great Moses Mendelssohn; after ten centuries of martyrdom they made the inevitable surrender, saving their self-respect by a reservation which I shall discuss hereafter. Now from the time of Herod the Great there has been a party in Jewish life which emphasized the study of the Law as the vital and unifying characteristic of Jewishness. This party was content to accept alien suzerainty so long as it was permitted religious freedom; it actually opposed the last revolt of Bar Kochba against Rome. When the rebellion failed and the Temple was razed, this faction conceded the annihilation of the Jewish nationality. It surrendered all claims to political independence and resolved to have its being as a religious sect in that motley of religions which constituted the Roman Empire. The theory thus founded received increasing acceptance in exile and finally flowered in the philosophy of Mendelssohn. But the very basis of this philosophy was soon demolished and rendered ridiculous by its most ardent proponents. For the assimilationists who had retained only their religion, cast off under the influence of nineteenth century liberalism the ritual and the traditional concepts which animated that ritual. In other words, by establishing as a religious doctrine the inevitable changes in their manners, they renounced the Jewish way of living and thereby destroyed the Law they claimed as the sole mark of their individuality. The assimilationists were thus obviously carrying out the surrender prompted by their subconscious desire to escape the handicap of Jewishness; and their sop to other subconscious instincts is equally evident in the formation of the "Jewish Mission" theory, that reservation and compromise which squared them with their ancestors and which enabled them to distinguish

their creed from the other forms of Unitarianism. These changes constituted the Reform Movement in Judaism. It was a conscious founding of a half-caste group, a Jewish minority that cut its racial ties and yet could not fuse with the nations of which it was a part. Mr. Friedman's explanation of the psychology underlying the action is undoubtedly as correct as it is ingenious.

Reform represents the attempt to adapt the religion to a non-Jewish environment—a step towards assimilation. But instead of basing the new sect on purely theological doctrines as the “sale of indulgences” or “salvation by faith” as against “good works” which are the bases of the various sects of Christianity, the early reformers made the interpretation of Jewish nationalism the chief differential of the new party. And how did they treat it? They symbolized it and substituted for a physical Zion of the prophets a symbolized Zion. Instead of the law going forth from Zion, it was to go forth from any Jewish focus—the so-called “mission theory of reform.” This symbolization has a meaning in psycho-analysis. It “tells of no longer recognized wish tendencies of the soul, which are not in accord with our conscious character, but basic to our existence. Strong resentment is felt toward bringing them into consciousness.” In the minds of the early scholars who founded Reform Judaism, the unconscious repressed wish was to cherish the ideals of Israel relating to Palestine. Their conscious character required them to be Frenchmen or Germans. They therefore symbolized the repressed Zionist wish so as to make it accord with the conscious character of the Jew, then a newly created citizen of the political state.

But naturally the majority of the Jews were not satisfied by this suppressed Zionist wish. Like the Zealots of old they bitterly opposed the assimilationist, at first simply animated by the memory and sentimental affection for the home land, and eventually inspired by the definite program of Zionism as the only solution of the problems of exile. Until the present century, however, the assimilationists despite their smaller numbers were much stronger than the nationalist

majority since they were more or less at ease in exile. Their wealth and their influence and their position enabled them to impress on the Christian world the makeshift policy they favored and to discredit the national aspirations of the masses. But when Theodor Herzl, Max Nordau, Israel Zangwill, Louis Brandeis and others became the leaders of the Zionist party, the “amateur Gentiles” as Horace Kallen has appropriately named them, sought cover behind their patulous Mission theory.

II

It is the conflict between the programs of Jewish life which I have discussed above that is articulated in the volumes under review. Now he who desires the definitive study of this struggle and the complete story of Jewish development since the first dispersion will turn to Horace Kallen's *Zionism and World Politics*, for there is a philosophical interpretation of Jewish history, not as an isolated chapter in the story of mankind, but in relation to the history of the world. Yet the Gentile will in some respects obtain a more intimate knowledge of the Jewish problem by plunging into these discussions *en famille* of Mr. Friedman and Mr. Wise. Naturally, the quarrel is presented in anything but a scientific manner; the authors are oratorical, characterized by exhortation and repetition rather than by a dispassionate pursuit of facts. But they indicate clearly enough the detailed aspects of the Jewish position and the questions which both Jews and non-Jews must solve in order to remove one of the major irritants of our present social order.

Mr. Friedman has sought to study the Jewish problem under the microscope of sociology and with the test-tube of psychology, and he has succeeded in approx-

imating the quality and the value of Jewish traditions and present day concepts. His standard of measurement is the cultural contributions to humanity made by the Jewish people and by this gauge he finds assimilation worthless and Zionism the only excuse for Jewish existence.

Without Zionism, without a center in Palestine, the Jews will, until they cease to exist, constitute an international irritation, as in the past—a problem in Germany as well as Russia, or in any country where they, as a scattered minority, refuse to merge themselves, completely and without qualification of blood or culture, with the majority in every political state. And when they cease to be, as, without a center they must, when the student will view them only as history, then the world will be the poorer, as it is for the passing of Greece and its art, or of Rome and its law, yes, poorer even as the world is for the passing of the red man from this continent. At this perilous stage of his existence, the Jew has no other avenue of escape from dissolution but the reestablishment by a portion of the people of a home and a center in Palestine. . . .

Today, the Jewish people is slowly dying, culturally and socially. Lacking a home and a center of life, its religious reserves are being exhausted. The members of the Jewish people may be contributing as individuals to the advance of civilization, but as a living, active, social group they count for naught. In France, Italy and Spain, they have almost ceased to be. The Jews of England and Germany are following a similar course. Only the immigration from eastern Europe, hitherto the arena of persecution, is temporarily postponing—for but a few generations—the process of decay of Jewish life in our own country.

Much of the blame for the spiritual and cultural sterility of the Jews in exile Mr. Friedman lays to the Reform movement. He finds that Liberal Judaism has failed not only in perpetuating the

Jewish contributions to civilization but that it has also been unsuccessful in achieving the task of assimilation which it set itself.

If the Jewish religion in America is now colorless, it is because there is no unified Jewish community which can idealize its social relations. The contribution of the Jews to the spiritual advance of man was made chiefly in the few hundred years when Israel was on its own soil and living a full, normal, social life. Twenty centuries of exile cannot boast of a single Moses, an Isaiah, or a David, the products of a united people.

Mr. Wise rises to the defense of Reform Judaism by conceding its weaknesses and pointing out the possibilities for enlarging and developing its elements of strength. He discards, first of all, the pernicious delusion of the "Mission of Israel," that impudent heritage of the primitive "chosen people" idea, and he accepts the challenge which modern conditions have offered to religion and asks for a revision of the very basis of the Reform idea. "*The fundamental attitude of Liberal Judaism is wrong,*" he writes boldly.

For Liberal Judaism like all religions is essentially an attitude of mind, not a body of teachings and beliefs. Teachings and beliefs are little more than the result, the outgrowth of the attitude which is taken. . . . What is imperatively necessary is a sweeping change in the whole conception of the purpose, the scope and the sanction of Liberal Judaism, a fundamental change in outlook and attitude.

Rabbi Wise sets himself the task of indicating what these changes must be. When he is through he has dredged a stagnant marsh of religiosity and set up a current of purposeful national life.